

LIFE

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Putting a star back in the frame

Hu Die, a Chinese movie icon who rose to fame in the 1920s, is celebrated at a Beijing photo exhibition

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Hu Die (1908-89), hailed as China's Greta Garbo, was among China's top film stars in the 1920s and 30s because of her elegance and natural acting style. And she embodied a transformation in the mentality of Chinese women.

Hu starred in 90 movies in a career spanning more than four decades. She was crowned the country's first "movie queen" in a public poll in 1933, with almost three times the votes of Ruan Lingyu, an actress who was her friend.

Hu retired from films at age 60 and then lived a low-profile life in Canada. But her independence and confidence make her an icon of timeless beauty, which is reflected in a photo exhibition, *Butterfly Wu: Queen of the Movies*, comprising more than 200 images of Hu at Beijing's Taikang Space. The event runs until Sept 23.

"Butterfly" is the meaning of her full name in Chinese, and Wu is how her surname is pronounced in the dialect of Shanghai, her birthplace.

The portraits and photos showcase the life of the legendary actress. And they also capture many historical moments in the Chinese film industry from the beginning to mid-20th century.

Some photos have rarely been seen before, including pictures that show Hu as a member of a Chinese film delegation visiting Europe in 1935.

Besides, there are snapshots from the 1940s and later — when she lived in Hong Kong and Canada.

The exhibition also features stills from some of Hu's best films, such as *Twin Sisters* (1934), for which she received critical acclaim for portraying a twin; and *Rear Door*, which won her the best actress award at the seventh Asian Film Festival in Tokyo in 1960.

The earliest photos include one dated 1917 when Hu moved to South China's Guangdong province following the transfer of her father, a railway general inspector.

Another one was taken in 1924 when her family moved back to Shanghai. Two years later, she played her first leading role in *Autumn Stirs Resentments* (*Qiu Shan Yuan*).

Still in her teens then, Hu had a demeanor of grace and decency. She mostly depicted sensitive and serious roles. Her acting talent was,



Clockwise from top left: Hu Die and actor Wang Jiting star in the 1928 film *Woman Detective*; Hu with her husband Pan Yousheng; Hu (center) with actress Wang Danfeng and Wang's husband, Liu Heqing, in 1985; Hu with Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang (left). PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

however, not fully appreciated till she acted in China's first sound film, *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony*, in 1931.

While silent-era movie actors had to rely on dramatic movements and facial expressions, Hu "acted naturally".

She was known to not act emotionally and was therefore called "beauty with a poker face" by film studio employees, said Li Zhen, a historian at the China Film Art Research Center in Beijing.

Hu's performances gained wide recognition after she portrayed real-life figures.

Her smooth transition to the sound era is partly attributed to her standard Mandarin, perfected during frequent travels in childhood, and because of the comprehensive training she had received.

She was among the first students at the China Film School, the country's first actor-training institution, which opened in 1924.

"In addition to the acting class,

students also learned film history and directing, photography, dancing, singing, makeup and practical skills, such as driving, horseback riding and swimming," Li said.

He said Hu often advised photographers how to take her portraits, and she also corrected angles and lighting when she thought the photojournalists needed help.

Hu had a huge fan base due to several commercially successful films, and she also won respect for starring in films that addressed national issues.

Her 1928 martial arts film, *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*, was such a huge box-office success that the film company produced 17 sequels in the following three years.

But besides doing commercially successful films, Hu also picked other subjects, like *Raging Waves* (1931), a film on the struggles of rural people.

She also portrayed a patriotic concubine from the 17th century in *Chen*

Yuanyuan the Beauty, a 1940 film rallying people to resist the Japanese aggression.

One of her lines from the film, "The offspring of Huang Di (ancient Chinese mythological emperor) will never be defeated," was used as a slogan to encourage the public to resist.

Still images from those two films are on display at the exhibition.

Li from the China Film Art Research Center said that Hu was a professional actress who was always on time for work. And she did not complain whether she was dangled from ropes or dropped into the mud during filming.

When Hu signed with the Mingxing Film Company in 1928, she received a monthly salary of 2,000 yuan (\$305) besides remuneration for the film, while the average wage for a worker was 20 yuan.

Li said Hu was popular with fans because she demonstrated a temperament different from women of the past. And she questioned feudal

norms. "In many photos of women of her time, I see fear, weakness and confusion. But Hu's eyes convey a positive attitude."

Hu is frequently compared with her peer Ruan, who often played modern women in movies.

But Ruan was quite conventional in real life, said Li. And she surrendered to patriarchal supremacy. She felt helpless and committed suicide at the age of 24.

"While Hu largely portrayed traditional roles, she was in fact a woman who made decisions on her own.

"She was mentally independent before she gained financial independence."

Li said that after she turned 40, Hu often received comments that she was no longer young and beautiful and had lost her luster on the big screen.

"But she was indifferent to the sarcasm, saying: 'Whether it is in life or on stage, one can't always play the leading role.'"